



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Fulbright Enrichment Dinner

Remarks of Ambassador Bleich at the Fulbright Enrichment Dinner, Canberra

(As prepared for delivery – August 25, 2011)

Thank you, Tangerine, for your kind introduction. And thank you all. This is a very special night. There is that old story about the night that President John F. Kennedy hosted a group of Nobel Laureates at the White House for dinner. He said “I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together in the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.” Since I’m fairly certain that Thomas Jefferson never actually dined at the Boathouse on the Lake in Canberra, I feel comfortable saying that this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered here at the Boathouse.

First, I want to welcome the new American Fulbright Scholars. Thank you for what you have done already that has brought you to these shores. For the drive and the deep desire for knowledge and peace that took you across an ocean. And for what you will do while you are here.

Let me also welcome supporters of the Fulbright program. Thank you to two outstanding South Australian Senators: my friend and former classmate, Labor Sen. Don Farrell who has joined by his wife Nimfa, and Liberal Sen. Cory Bernardi. It’s in the true spirit of Fulbright that members of opposing parties are here tonight to support this event. Although I notice they are on opposite sides of the table. And we removed both of their knives. But it is great to have you both here.

Thank you to the Sponsors of Fulbright scholarships, and in particular ANU, CSIRO, and DEEWR for generously funding Fulbright scholarships. In a time when markets are uncertain (which is how we diplomats say it) there is no better investment, no better bet, than in the capacities of these new Fulbright scholars to discover ways to improve our world.

Thank you to the Commission’s Board of Directors, led by my friend Steven Schwartz. You all selflessly donate your time and energy without any expectation of a return except for one thing -- the satisfaction of seeing a world in which our best and brightest individuals come together to learn, to understand, and build a wiser and more peaceful world.



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Thank you to the Fulbright staff, led this past year by Lyndell Wilson, for your tireless work. These scholars would not be here but for you, and this night would not be here without you.

Finally, it is a great treat to welcome the new executive director, Dr. Tangerine Holt. You now have the second best job in all of Canberra – after mine.

Everyone here tonight is a special friend of Fulbright, but tonight is about the true stars of this evening, the outstanding Americans who have been selected as 2011 Fulbright Scholars.

We honor you because we see in each of you this one thing: the potential to fundamentally change the world for the better. Those are not empty, meaningless words. They are the essence of Fulbright.

In September 1945, William Fulbright, a mere freshman senator from Arkansas, had a single idea: to turn our swords into plowshares. He proposed that the United States use proceeds from the sales of surplus war property to fund the “promotion of international goodwill through the exchange of students in the fields of education, culture and science.” Today, more than six decades later, we celebrate the wisdom of that vision. It has spawned 4600 U.S.-Australia scholars and launched their extraordinary achievements in virtually all disciplines. It helped produce ANZUS and our great alliance. And it helped forge a world in which both Australia and America have turned old rivals into our friends.

This was one person’s idea. It gives proof to Margaret Mead’s adage that “we should never doubt the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Fulbright’s insight is that learning is different – and better -- when it occurs with people from other nations and in unfamiliar places.

Being with people who were schooled and trained differently – whose life experience is different – sharpens our insights. Many times, faced with a hard problem, we think we are thinking, when in fact we are only rearranging our prejudices to get to the outcome we want. Being with scholars with different backgrounds, different approaches, tests our thinking. It exposes and breaks down those prejudices. And it makes us better thinkers.

And being in a different place makes us think differently as well. Think of what it is like when you travel some place for the first time. We go somewhere we’ve never been before – and we see it with fresh, intense eyes, and bring a new perspective to that world. We are more aware of the way the air smells, of the color of the sky, of the taste of the



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foods, or the wildlife around us. We learn a different language and we discover that words exist for thoughts that had been left unformed in our minds.

And we also let go of some of our fears. We arrive in a place wary of others and discover how normal things are – that they, like us, seek little more than a better life for their children, and a good George Clooney movie.

Einstein once said 'No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it. We need to see the world anew.' The genius of Fulbright is in providing that opportunity to our best and brightest. To the scholars here tonight – your challenge is to take the knowledge and wisdom from your studies, and then have the courage to experience the world again as a child would – without ego and without self-importance, but as a guest in an unfamiliar land. Young children learn easily in part because they aren't yet afraid to be instructed, or to be challenged, or to fail.

This is the genius of Fulbright everywhere. But it is especially true here in Australia; because Australians start with the same fearlessness about the power of ideas. They're pretty fearless about crocodiles and sharks and box jellyfish and a few other things too. But our societies are based on more than just free capital, free markets, free movement; most of all they are based on what many others fear – free minds. Americans and Australians share this faith – that no idea is so dangerous that it cannot be discussed. Progress comes from testing and challenging all ideas – good and bad – and having the judgment to follow the good and discard the bad.

Because of this unique “mate-ship,” there is no better or more important place in the world for our scholars to exchange their thoughts than here in Australia. For over six decades, we have demonstrated that together we can solve problems that other nations can't.

Together, Americans and Australians defeated the forces of fascism, put a man on the moon, ended a cold war, built two of the greatest economies in human history, raised millions of people out of poverty, and created the greatest friendship among two nations ever witnessed in international relations. In short, together we can do anything.

So to our scholars tonight, it is your turn to maintain, and reimagine, and rejuvenate our partnership to take on the unique challenges that await us. By accepting this scholarship you take on the mantle of ensuring that our partnership stays strong and relevant into the future. And for that, I congratulate you on all that you have done, and I thank you for all that you will do.



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